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ANZUS bickering no longer joking matter for Lange

By Tom Breen
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In March, New Zealand's prime minister was in a joking mood.

Asked if he was upset by Washington's angry reaction to his decision to ban U.S. warships from New Zealand ports, Prime Minister David Lange replied, "If they really want to [unnerve] us, they should cut off 'Dallas' and the 'A-Team'."

Nobody, including Mr. Lange, is laughing now.

"New Zealanders are concerned that the United States is getting the impression that we're all anti-American down here since the rift," Bob Fox, editor of the Wellington Evening Post said yesterday. "Nothing could be further from the truth. Few of us feel that way."

Still, the unlikely feud between the United States and its tiny South Pacific ally has threatened the stability of the 34-year-old ANZUS defense pact among Australia, New Zealand and the United States, creating a rift Washington never envisioned and one that confuses Americans because of the longtime and close relationship between the two nations.

"What this squabble has done," said one congressional foreign-affairs specialist, "is to upset the entire ANZUS appletart. Sure, New Zealand only has 3 million people and defense forces of 12,000, but the U.S. obviously is having a lot of problems in the world today and can't afford to lose a South Pacific friend, big or little. Everyone is upset, because most people feel that New Zealand has no beef with us."

At the same time, said the specialist and several others interviewed recently, New Zealand can little afford to jeopardize its security pact with either the United States or Australia. Out there in the South Pacific, 1,300 miles from Australia, it is vulnerable and needs access to U.S. and Australian intelligence information, as well as protection should a crisis occur.

Since February, when New Zealand refused to allow American warships to dock at its ports because U.S. policy dictates that no nuclear-armed or nuclear-powered vessel be described that way, the United States has stopped short of severe sanctions but has cut off the flow of intelligence information.

The deteriorating relations recently have begun to disturb a wide range of New Zealand officials, including Mr. Lange, who later this month will send an emissary to Washington in an attempt to patch things up. Further, Mr. Lange indicated early last week he was willing to relax his position on banning warships, in order to restore New Zealand-U.S. ties.

Meanwhile, State Department officials are encouraged, speculating that an end to the six-month freeze might be coming shortly.

Such optimism, however, might be premature. The Washington Times interviews indicate.

Despite Mr. Fox's contention that his countrymen generally are fond of Americans, there appears to be a growing anti-nuclear fear across New Zealand that eventually may strain relations with the United States and possibly Australia to a point they can't be repaired.

Said a spokesman for moderate Republican Sen. William Cohen of Maine, "The senator feels like a lot of people here [on Capitol Hill]: With New Zealand impairing the way the ANZUS alliance functions and being recalcitrant, we [the United States] should exercise our options. Frankly, New Zealand's [newly] relaxed position seems nothing more than a subtle rhetorical shift."

Many congressional liberals and conservatives support Mr. Cohen's view that the U.S. obligation to defend and trade with New Zealand should end if that nation continues to balk on its ANZUS obligations, which includes allowing U.S. ships into its ports.

Moreover, argue experts and politicians in the United States, New

Zealand anti-nuclear activists should be directing their wrath at France, not the United States. France, the only nation to conduct recent nuclear tests in the South Pacific, has been implicated in the bombing and sinking of the Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior.

The heightened anti-nuclear activity, however, appears to have transformed all nations with such capabilities into enemies, of sorts, for many New Zealanders.

Said activist Philadel Bunkle: "We [want] to get a message across that times [have] changed. People don't feel particularly protected [by superpowers], and the old arguments have worn a little thin."

Added Labor Party member Helen Clark: "There are no threats to New Zealand's security. The only nation that has sufficient military projection to invade us is the United States, so we're not that worried."

With that in mind, the anti-nuclear wing of Mr. Lange's Labor Party moved in Christchurch over the weekend to persuade the prime minister not to soften his stand on the ban of U.S. warships, although most diplomatic sources expect Mr. Lange to continue moving toward an understanding with Washington.

For his part, Australian Prime Minister Robert Hawke has tried to end the U.S.-New Zealand squabble by making sure that a treaty signed by South Pacific nations last month to make the South Pacific a nuclear-free zone still would allow the transit of nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed warships through the region. That would end France's nuclear testing but would protect U.S. security interests.

Mr. Hawke and others — in Washington and throughout the South Pacific — admit they are tired of a feud that no one expected.

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